



24 Stott Avenue, Norwich, CT 06360
Phone: 860-859-4148, ext. 290
Fax: 860-222-3175

Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing:
Thursday February 17, 2022
Funding for Office of Early Childhood

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Senator Hartley, Representative Walker, Representative Dathan, Representative Nolan and members of the Appropriations:

My name is Rebecca Smith and I am the Birth to Three Manager, as well as, a Speech Language Pathologist at Easterseals of Greater Waterbury's Birth to Three Program. I have worked for Easterseals's Birth to Three program for 18 years. Easterseals of Greater Waterbury is a non-profit organization providing services to children and adults with differing abilities across multiple counties and towns in Connecticut.

Easterseals Birth to Three program meets the developmental needs of infants and toddlers from birth to 3 years of age who have developmental delays. Our team, like other providers in the state, are key partners with families to meet the needs of their children and to help them advance their development. This starts with evaluations and assessments, to treatment and developing and implementing a plan to help them transition to the community, outpatient services and/or school systems. Our program is built around the foundation of a parent being a child's best advocate and it is our responsibility to provide parents with all the tools they need to advocate for the needs of their children. This is becoming more and more difficult with the funding challenges we are currently facing. Not identifying children in need of early intervention services or struggling to deliver services to those who are eligible, is not only tragic for the child, but has negative impacts for their communities and the economy.

Connecticut Birth to Three programs have not had a rate increase or rate review in the last 5 years, since rates were initially established in 2017, nor have programs received any direct ARPA payments to provide financial relief from COVID. Birth to Three programs are covering many expenses that are not reimbursable but nonetheless are necessary. Because we are a fee for service system, when families must cancel, a service cannot be provided but our program still must pay staff in spite of not having that revenue. We must still provide the technology and materials needed so that they can do their work, whether families cancel or not, and we as a program cannot afford to absorb any more of these costs. I'm here because I love working with the Birth to Three families, but something has to give. Please help programs like mine be able to afford to keep staff and continue to provide exceptional early intervention services that Connecticut is known for. The infants, toddlers and their caregivers need it, want it and are entitled to the services my team provides.

The next planned rate review is still 2 years away, meaning we will not have had any rate adjustments for **7 years!** Programs are dealing with the ever-increasing costs related to basic benefits for staff, including the challenge of paying competitive wages to attract and retain staff in times when there is also an extreme workforce shortage in early intervention. WE NEED

HELP. In addition, the increased funding (4%) for non-profits agreed to last legislative session DID NOT include Birth to Three Services.

These funding challenges directly impact all Birth to Three programs in Connecticut and almost 10,000 children and families by extension. Staffing vacancies directly impact families which causes extreme service delays, staff burnout, and more.

In my role at Easterseals I have seen the benefit of our services with families, especially in our ability to build a parent's capacity to be able to advocate for the needs of their children which is one of the main goals of early intervention services. Without adequate funding to Birth to Three, we will not be able to continue to provide the level of services that meets the needs of children and their families in Connecticut.

Please help Easterseals Birth to Three and other essential Birth to Three programs by:

- Including Birth to Three services as part of any Cost of Living Adjustment in the budget
- Revising regulations to provide timely and predictable rate increases for programs to account for doing business in Connecticut.
- Revising funding streams to support short-term and long-term General Administrative Payment increases.
- Immediately increasing Birth to Three rates by 10% to help sustain all Early Intervention agencies in Connecticut.

We respectfully ask that you remember Easterseals and other Birth to Three programs during the upcoming legislative session. We are providing essential services without adequate rates to sustainably continue to fund our services so we can continue to help this most vulnerable population in Connecticut.

Thank you,

Rebecca Smith, M.S., CCC/SLP, ITFS
Birth to Three Manager
Speech Language Pathologist
Infant, Toddler, and Family Specialist